

Multimedia

Diffability Hollywood Review

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What does disability mean in film? What is life like for a working actor with a visible disability? What are the contradictory ways in which those who self-identify as disabled respond to cinematic portrayals of disability? These are some of the questions explored in filmmaker Adrian Esposito's remarkable documentary *Diffability Hollywood*. The film explores representations of disability in film as well as the lives of young performers with disabilities, tracking their careers in film and television. It is a unique work, hosted within the film by Esposito, who himself identifies as autistic.

Diffability Hollywood provides a well-rounded historical overview of representations of disability in film. Drawing on the voices of film scholars, the film leads us through some of the most compelling and recurring stereotypes of disability, including hyper-sexualized or infantilized characters. It also explores the ways in which these make believe characters may at times have a real impact on real life perceptions of disability, and in turn, actual policy.

While not comprehensive (its historical overview is organized by theme rather than strictly chronologically), its survey offers what will be fascinating new territory for many viewers. Particularly interesting is the film's coverage of 'crip-sploitation' films like *The Amazing Mr. No Legs* (1978).

The film not only offers a bird's eye view of the ways in which those with disability had been portrayed on the screen, it also offers unprecedented, intimate glimpses into the lives of contemporary actors with disabilities and their experiences in the industry. It also is enriched by insights from non-disabled actors (e.g., Johnny Knoxville) about their experiences working with actors with disabilities in film. The stories of their professional lives also benefit from the voices of the parents and mentors who have facilitated their training and careers. The film's insights into the lives of actors with disabilities, largely in their own words, is without peer in any documentary of which this writer is aware.

The film's unique structure, moving between historical overview and portrait of artists, allows it to offer some unusual and very compelling content. This includes an informal reception study conducted by the director. In this portion of the film, a group of people with disabilities are gathered together for a screening of Tod Browning's 1932 film *Freaks*. Watching their real-time reactions to the film and hearing their responses offers a rare and valuable glimpse into the varied ways in which real audiences respond to film and talk back to the screen. This is particularly valuable as very little research has been done on spectators with disabilities.

The film is recommended for the casual viewer but suitable also as a supplemental text in an extended seminar on disability in film and media. Overall this unique and compelling film fills a major gap. It is essential viewing for those interested in representations of disability and helps contribute to our understanding of the contradictory and often surprising ways in which film and disability may intersect.

Diffability Hollywood is available for educational licensing. Information available at: <https://espocinema.wordpress.com/diffability-hollywood/>

Diffability Hollywood. Dir. Esposito, Adrian. Espocinema, 2016.